

## President's Interview



Interview of U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige by Marty Abbott,  
President, American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages



U.S. SECRETARY OF  
EDUCATION  
ROD PAIGE

**Marty Abbott:** Secretary Paige, on behalf of the 8,000 language educators who are members of ACTFL, I want to thank you for your remarks made during the third celebration of International Education Week last November. We are heartened by your support for language instruction for America's students and for bringing an international focus to the curriculum. We would like to ask you some more specific questions regarding the initiatives you announced. In the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, foreign languages is listed as a core subject. What role do you see language instruction playing as we implement this powerful legislation?

**Rod Paige:** First, let me congratulate you, Marty, on your new role as President of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, and thank you for the opportunity to communicate with the 8,000 language edu-

cators who are members of ACTFL.

While English competency should always be the priority and should be a language of instruction for all students from the beginning of school, foreign languages can and should be integrated into the curriculum from the earliest grades possible, for as many students as possible from all backgrounds. Research shows that learning a second (or a third and a fourth) language develops a person's analytical abilities more effectively than learning a single language. We also know that learning a second language increases one's understanding of one's native language. To the extent that foreign language learning improves a student's cognitive and academic performance, it goes hand in glove with the *No Child Left Behind* goal of ensuring high student outcomes for all children.

The ability to speak more than one language also contributes significantly to mutual understanding among nations, global competitiveness, and national security, as well as academic development and personal fulfillment. Foreign language instruction should be part of every student's academic experience, certainly beginning in secondary school, and preferably beginning in elementary school. At a minimum, children should be exposed to foreign languages; however, programs that lead to communicative and academic competency upon graduation from high school are the most desirable. And, to the greatest extent possible, foreign language should not be seen as an "add-on" but rather, foreign languages should be integrated into the curriculum.

You might be interested to know that I am currently a student of the Spanish language. Upon a recent visit to Mexico, I developed a greater appreciation for complete immersion in the language one is learning. It is clear that when students are surrounded by the target language, it makes learning so much more effective.

**M.A.:** One of your directives was that we as Americans provide leadership on education issues in international forums and settings. How do you see ACTFL taking a role in this leadership?

**R.P.:** ACTFL, as well as other education-related nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), has a vital role to play in the implementation of NCLB. The Federal Government cannot and should not implement NCLB on its own. The law was the product of bipartisan support and input from educators at all levels from around the country. Likewise, its implementation requires the participation of parents, teachers, principals, school districts, state departments of education, and NGOs. For foreign language in particular, ACTFL, as the largest organization representing foreign language teachers nationwide, can contribute by (a) communicat-

ing to its members the position of the Department vis-à-vis foreign language and high standards for student performance; (b) providing important input to the Department, states, and districts regarding best practices and how to effectively integrate foreign languages into the curriculum in a manner that complements NCLB's goals; (c) working with the Department and the rest of the education community to identify high-quality research that measures the impact of foreign language learning in cognitive and academic performance; (d) assisting the Department to ascertain the current state of foreign language policy and practice nationwide; (e) providing input to the Department regarding models for assessing foreign language competency at the K-12 level; (f) working with the Department to promote the importance of international education skills for all U.S. citizens; and (g) encouraging classroom-to-classroom linkages, both within the U.S. and with schools abroad, to promote foreign language learning and cultural understanding. These linkages should also include American teachers consulting online with foreign colleagues about their experiences in language teaching.

**M.A.:** *What role do you see for colleges and universities in establishing partnerships with K-12 programs?*

**R.P.:** I would like to see increased coordination between the K-12 and university sectors. This kind of coordination should, of course, mean greater collaboration between K-12 schools and schools of education where there is sharing and dissemination of best practices and materials, effective teacher training, facilitating of virtual exchanges, and so on. Increased coordination should also include collaboration between K-12 schools and other faculties as well. In addition, the university sector should more clearly communicate its needs to the K-12 sector since, in a manner of speaking, the university sector is the “consumer” of the K-12 “product.” Universities and K-12 could also work with one another to better articulate foreign language program streams, as well as foreign language requirements. Universities could send speakers to K-12 schools to impress upon students the importance of foreign language learning and other international skills. Furthermore, universities with significant expertise in foreign language and area studies could identify faculty to mentor and/or serve as resources for K-12 teachers.

**M.A.:** *We are very interested in your initiative to recognize a teacher “whose outstanding work has helped our young people understand world issues and other countries, cultures, and languages.” How might ACTFL support your department’s work in this area?*

**R.P.:** I appreciate your asking this question. I believe that teachers have one of the most difficult and important jobs in society so we should recognize their outstanding achievements whenever we can. I hope that, in addition to the Department’s recognizing outstanding achievement in teaching, each community or even each school will acknowledge the great work of their teachers. As for this particular recognition, the staff in the Under Secretary’s office is now at work to implement an effective way to identify this teacher. I appreciate your offer of support and perhaps, once we have a procedure in place, we can call on your association for assistance.

**M.A.:** *Finally, ACTFL is sponsoring a project that will proclaim 2005 as the Year of Languages in the United States. It is modeled after the highly successful European Union 2001 Year of Languages. How might the U.S. Department of Education collaborate with ACTFL in this endeavor?*

**R.P.:** This certainly sounds like a worthy endeavor and perhaps the Department could participate as an official cosponsor of this project. I would like to ask you to work with the Office of the Under Secretary and the International Affairs staff there to see how the Department can join you in your efforts.

**M.A.:** *Mr. Secretary, I thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. I know that our members join me in thanking you again for your efforts to bring a world-class education to all our children and young adult learners.*

**R.P.:** Thank you so much, Marty, for all that you and the members of ACTFL do to help broaden the world of our students. I wish you much success in your future endeavors. ♦